

I'm OK; The Bull Is Dead

Opinion by Gopal K. Kapur

JUNE 21, 2004 ([COMPUTERWORLD](#)) - Early in my career, when I worked as an engineer, my boss had a process by which the engineering team was expected to report project status. He insisted that we use the following steps, in the specified order:

- 1. Punch line:** The facts; no adjectives, adverbs or modifiers. "Milestone 4 wasn't hit on time, and we didn't start Task 8 as planned." Or, "Received charter approval as planned."
- 2. Current status:** How the punch-line statement affects the project. "Because of the missed milestone, the critical path has been delayed five days."
- 3. Next steps:** The solution, if any. "I will be able to make up three days during the next two weeks but will still be behind by two days."
- 4. Explanation:** The reason behind the punch line. "Two of the five days' delay is due to late discovery of a hardware interface problem, and the remaining three days' delay is due to being called to help the customer support staff for a production problem."

Notice the almost reverse order of these points in comparison with the common reporting style in which team members start with a long explanation of why things went wrong. Using the four steps described above, the project manager learns the most important information first, then he learns supporting information to help complete the story.

At first, reporting this way wasn't a comfortable thing to do. It forced us to get to the point quickly and not resort to obfuscation. But not only did I learn to practice this style of status reporting at the office, I also taught it to my children.

It was put to the test a few years later. It was past midnight, long after the time my son Raj, then 17 years old, should have been home. He was new to driving, and it was a stormy night. His mother and I were anxious and concerned about his well-being. Finally, the phone rang. It was Raj, and he said, "Dad, I'm OK; the bull is dead."

Thank God my son was fine, but the comment about the dead bull intrigued me. We didn't own a bull. Where was he? How did the bull die? And why was he telling me about it?

Then he said, "The car is damaged but operable."

All right. He had gotten into some type of accident, the car wasn't a total loss, and there was a dead bull (still a great puzzle). I wondered whether our car insurance covered dead bulls.

He then explained about the location of the accident and informed me that a person nearby had called the police and that he (Raj) had taken a few pictures of the accident scene.

At this point my wife woke up and asked, "Is that Raj, and is he OK?" I told her, "He is OK; the bull is dead." This got her attention, and she was now wide awake.

Though a bit angry that Raj was so late coming home and that he had gotten into an accident, I was impressed by his calm demeanor and his ability to keep his wits about him. Raj went on

to say, "You don't need to rush. I'll explain when I see you." I hung up the telephone and began to get ready to drive to the scene of the accident.

At this point my wife, still puzzled by the information she had, inquired about the details. I repeated to her, "He is OK, the bull is dead, and he will explain the details when I get there." A bit annoyed, she said, "This is one of your punch-line things, isn't it?"

I was greatly impressed by Raj's succinct way of giving me the right information in the right detail without going into unnecessary explanations. In journalism, this is known as the inverted pyramid style, which begins with the conclusion, followed by the most important facts and, finally, the details. This contrasts with academic writing, which opens with a problem statement, elaborates on the background, discusses influencing factors and finally states the conclusions. When the academic approach is used to give project status reports, people who are still awake for the punch line are silently praying, "Please, God, kill me now." That's precisely why I start with the punch line.

For many project team members, starting with the punch line can be disconcerting, but we have found that once they become accustomed to it, they truly enjoy the clarity of the message and the time saved in getting the point across.

Try it, you'll like it.

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